

# Strengthen your (intended) culture in a crisis

**Times are tough. But even in, or perhaps especially in, a time of crisis and uncertainty, organizations have a great opportunity to strengthen their culture and way of working.**

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I'M STRUGGLING THROUGH THIS MYSELF. As an owner of a couple of businesses, survival has become an overarching priority in this crisis. I suspect you may have many of the same pressures. You may need to rapidly cut expenses (or scale up expenses!), shift your operations to handle a dramatic shift in customer demand, manage cash flow more tightly, find new sources of financing, solve new problems or challenges that never crossed your mind, and/or create new products and services you weren't even thinking about just last week.

Conventional wisdom suggests we shut down all "non-essential" tasks and reprioritize our energy on surviving the moment. Jettison every unnecessary thing! Live to fight another day!

And yet, your organization's culture and ingrained patterns of communicating and working may be creating challenges, just now, that make it more difficult for you to handle the current crisis. And, when the dust settles and the crisis is over, you may find that your culture has evolved in ways that were unexpected and unintentional. This evolution (or devolution?) of culture could make it harder for your organization to power out of the crisis and thrive longer term. Culture is a necessary enabler of both the short-term and longer-term success you want to make happen. The tricky part, though, is that culture operates at a less tangible or visible level and is therefore easier for leaders to ignore in tough times.

Culture encompasses a wide range of interacting factors and dynamics in an organization – individual mindsets and capabilities, interpersonal dynamics, communications,

performance management systems, management practices, frontline work practices, etc. But, narratives or stories are one simple and productive entryway into this complex world.

## TUNE IN TO THE STORIES BEING TOLD IN YOUR ORGANIZATION – YES, EVEN NOW

In my years of consulting, every organization I have stepped foot in carries within it (and continues to be affected by) the stories of past crises handled poorly. For example, at a pharmaceutical manufacturer, I heard people tell and retell a story of how poorly people felt they were treated when, years ago, the company made some very abrupt reductions in the workforce to handle an unexpected shift in customer demand. The message the workforce received – accurately or inaccurately – was that the company's management only cared about their own profits and bonuses, and that the lofty language management used about treating the company workers with respect and like a family were not said in good faith. And, surprisingly, even people who weren't at the company when this situation happened would retell the story as an example of what the company is like today. The story was as real for the newer people as it was for the people who lived through it. In this case, the crisis of the past persisted in the present moment and was a significant contributor to active and recurring breakdowns in trust, accountability, creative problem solving, and, ultimately company performance.

Culture lives within and is revealed by the patchwork of stories people tell about the organization's purpose, what it takes to survive and fit in, how we work and succeed together, and how we should relate to each other. And these stories don't just describe the past – they have the power to create or generate the future. They have a tangible impact on how people and the organization perform. So, we ignore them at our own peril.

Herein lies the risk of a crisis, but also the opportunity. The actions you take now will not only determine your organization's short-term survival but also its long-term ability to thrive. There's potential for a great story here. Are you ready to create it?

### USE THIS CRISIS TO BUILD AND REINFORCE A NARRATIVE THAT ENHANCES THE ORGANIZATION YOU WANT TO BE

You and your leadership team can take some near-term actions that will allow you to strengthen your organization's culture in a positive direction WHILE you meet the immediate needs of this crisis.

First, **become more aware of the story you and your leadership team are telling** about this crisis. What is the nature of this story – is it only about the challenge of the moment or is there also space for learning and growth in this challenging time? Is the story only about what you don't want to happen or are you also painting a picture of the future you want to create? The best stories are ones that help people connect to the past and the current situation, but also to get inspired about an exciting way forward (vs. being fearful of what to avoid). Fear-based narratives can produce action in the near-term, but they can exhaust an organization and lose their power over time. Inspiring stories have more staying power. Shift your story if you can.

Second, **ensure the stories you and your leadership are telling are synched up**. Are you all telling a similar story or are members of the leadership team creating competing narratives? This may require a lot of difficult conversations among you and your colleagues. Are you having these difficult conversations effectively – or avoiding them or having them poorly? The aim here should be on achieving mutual understanding and alignment on a vision or direction. You should all be telling a similar story of where the organization is headed and why. This will help alleviate the stress and fear in an uncertain situation. Leave room for people to determine their own specific and creative how's as needed, though.

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Third, **be authentic and vulnerable**. For many leaders this may be exceedingly difficult and out of your comfort zone, though. Some leaders tend to minimize the bad feelings of others or to seek approval. This kind of orientation may cause some leaders to withhold bad news from the organization – for fear of looking bad themselves or making others feel bad. Other leaders have been trained to “be strong and decisive” especially in times of crisis. This kind of orientation may cause some leaders to focus on the tasks at hand and ignore the seemingly irrelevant impact on people and relationships. Both of these orientations – approval seeking or outcomes above all else – can erode trust in leadership. This can impact your team's ability to deal with a crisis and corrode performance long term. A more effective orientation for leaders is to demonstrate a degree of BOTH candor AND care. The message people need to hear in a crisis is “I care enough to level with you.” And sharing how the current crisis is impacting you is part of this. Be human.

Fourth, **anticipate the story you will create through your actions**. Stories aren't just words, they are embodied or acted out. Inevitably, people will interpret and draw meaning from them. As an example, at one financial services company undergoing a lean transformation there are two primary actions leaders are taking in the face of this current crisis. One type of leader is “stopping” all of their continuous improvement work to shift their focus on the priorities of the moment. The other type of leader is using their continuous improvement tools to help them solve the new problems that have arisen. Even after 4 weeks, it is clear within the organization what story people are reading into these actions – some areas are deeply reinforcing a culture of continuous improvement, others are not. Make sure your actions reinforce the intended culture you're trying to create.

Fifth, **go to where the real work is happening in your organization and listen**, even if that has to happen virtually. What you learn from people across the organization will hopefully help you respond to the crisis with candor, care, and effectiveness. You'll also get a less filtered view of the narratives at play in the organization and will have more chances to share your own story and inspire people directly. Take the time to learn what's really going on.

Lastly, **repeat and reinforce your message**. In times of uncertainty, people need some consistency. Tell and retell your hopeful story. Act it out. Listen and get feedback. Continue to reinforce your aspirations...even when it's really hard to stay focused on that.